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QUALIFICATIONS AND DUTIES

OF

RULING ELDERS

IN THE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

BY THE

REV. WM. M. ENGLES.

PHILADELPHIA:

PRESBYTERIAN TRACT AND SUNDAY SCHOOL SOCIETY.

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RULING ELDERS, &c.

AUTHORITY FOR RULING ELDERS.

In the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, ample provision has been made for the wise and equitable government of the Church by Sessions, Presbyteries, Synods, and General Assemblies. In these judicatories are vested various grades of authority, which, in their relative exercise, happily tend to secure the particular rights of individuals, and to promote the general interests of the Gospel. A session is the lowest ecclesiastical court, and is composed of the Pastor and Ruling Elders of a particular Congregation; the latter are properly the representatives of the people, by whom they are chosen; and in the various judicatories, possess an equality of power with the clergy. Frequent attempts have been made by the advocates of Diocesan Episcopacy, and of Independency, to invalidate the authority of this class of church officers; but we have direct and collateral evidence that they were recognised by the primitive church, and accordingly, that they now act under a scriptural warrant. It has been generally conceded, that the first Christian congregations were formed after the model of the Jewish Synagogues, and it is to be presumed that this correspondence included the principal features of government, as well as of worship. In the Synagogue, there was a presiding officer, who conducted the worship, and who was called the minister, or angel, of the church; and there were associated with him, persons styled Rulers of the Synagogue, whose office rendered it incumbent on them to aid the minister in the government. The Apostles, to whom was intrusted the organization of the Christian Church, were intimately acquainted with all the forms and peculiarities of the Synagogue worship, and were no doubt ready to incorporate into the structure of the former, any features observable in the latter, which might be adapted to their purpose. A sense of propriety, and regard for the interest of the infant church, would induce them, also, to guard carefully against any needless deviations from the established religion, in favour of which public sentiment was so strongly enlisted; and there was every reason to believe that in the particular case referred to, they did not deviate. If the minister of the Synagogue required the assistance of the Rulers of the Synagogue to maintain a proper government, it was natural to suppose that in a Christian Church, in which Sacraments were to be administered, discipline en-

forced, and a strict oversight of the flock observed, the minister would have still stronger reasons to seek the aid of a corresponding class of officers. The Apostles must have foreseen this, and is it not therefore probable that they provided for the exigency, especially when so forcibly reminded by the example before them? We think the presumption is in favour of their having adopted this peculiarity in the structure of the Jewish Church.

But we are not left to mere probable evidence. If the Scriptures are silent on this subject, the right of lay elders may well be impugned; for although expediency may suggest and sanction the appointment of secular officers in the house of God, without any infringement upon its scriptural order, it can never give validity to the appointment of its spiritual officers. A licence of this kind has never been contemplated by the word of God, and should it be assumed, the Church of Christ would groan under the incumbrances of man's device.

There are three passages which are relied on, principally, as furnishing the authority for Lay-elders. When viewed in connexion, they mutually interpret each other, and explicitly teach that, in the primitive church, there was a class of officers whose duty it was to *rule*, in distinction from Pastors, who instructed the people in their public preaching, and from Deacons, who attended to the necessities of the poor.

In 1 Corinthians xii. 28, the Apostle, in referring to the different officers established in the Church, says, "God hath set some in the church, first Apostles, secondarily Prophets, thirdly Teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, GOVERNMENTS, diversities of tongues." GOVERNMENTS are here presented as a distinct office, and the first clause of the verse prevents the application of the term as denoting the civil magistracy. It is one of the offices which *God has set in the Church*.

In Romans xii. 4–8, the Apostle describing the Church as a body, composed of various and distinct members, says, "For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office; so we being many are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation; he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he THAT RULETH, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness." If this passage describes the gifts and offices bestowed on the Church, as it evidently does, we think we discern in it the three distinct offices—of the Pastor, who instructs the people by prophesying,

teaching, and exhortation; of the Deacon, who takes care of the poor, and who is required to give in simplicity, and show mercy with cheerfulness; and of the Elder, who is to *rule with diligence.*

The third passage which we shall quote is from 1 Timothy, v. 17. "Let the Elders that rule well, be counted worthy of double honour; especially they who labour in the word and doctrine." Here again is a clearly marked distinction between Elders who rule, and Elders who teach. This distinction is designated by the word *especially*, the introduction of which, in this connexion, would have been contrary to the propriety of language, if but one kind of Elders had been referred to. When Paul tells Titus (Titus i. 10.) "There are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, *especially* they of the circumcision," he plainly distinguishes between the persons of this character, who belonged to the circumcision, and the persons of this character, who did not belong to the circumcision; and so in the passage before quoted, the word *especially* distinguishes between the Elders who rule well, and the Elders who labour in the word and doctrine.

But it has been urged, that if this be really an office in the Church of Christ, the duties appertaining to it would certainly have been specified. This consequence is by no means certain. We cannot precisely learn what were the peculiar duties of an Apostle, or an Evangelist, from any Scriptural enumeration of them, and yet, who will pretend to doubt that there were such officers in the Church? But the supposition, that the Scriptures are silent respecting the duties of Lay-elders is entirely gratuitous. We learn something respecting the nature of their office, when informed that it is not a part of their duty to labour in the word and doctrine; and this information becomes more accurate, when we are told that it is their duty to rule well and diligently. Besides whatever is said of preaching Elders, in relation to the discipline and general government of the Church, may be fairly concluded as applicable to Ruling Elders, who are associated with them as HELPS.

Although Calvin exercised an active instrumentality in reviving this office, and placing it upon its present basis, yet, it is perfectly gratuitous to assert that it was the result of his inventive genius. He merely restored to the light what had been concealed beneath the corruptions of the church. The general prevalence of Popery accounts for the disuse into which it had fallen; for it was totally at variance with the spirit of that system to admit the authority of a Lay-eldership, which would operate, in any degree, as a restraint upon the domineering pride of the clergy. Among the Waldenses, however, that

glorious remnant of God's heritage, the Church was governed, (as we are informed by Perrin, their historian,) by the united counsels of Ministers and Elders. And if we look back to the fourth century, we find both Augustine and Ambrose distinctly recognising the Eldership as distinguished from the clerical office. Even at that early period, it did not, it is true, occupy the prominence to which it was entitled; but the fact is alluded to by Ambrose, as a matter of regret, and as an evidence of corruption in the Church. "The Jewish Synagogue and primitive Christian Church," says he, "had Elders, without whose counsel nothing was done. By what negligence they fell into disuse, I know not; unless it were through the sloth or rather pride of the clergy, desiring to appear the sole important order in the Church." The suggestion of the Father is highly probable, as the existence of a properly constituted Lay-eldership must ever be a serious difficulty in the way of a corrupt clergy, who aim at the assumption of exclusive ecclesiastical dominion.*

QUALIFICATIONS OF RULING ELDERS.

In the preceding remarks, we have attempted to demonstrate the scriptural authority of a Lay-eldership; and it is our purpose, in the present, to designate some of the principal QUALIFICATIONS which are requisite to the dignified and efficient discharge of its official duties.

As the office is spiritual, and the duties belonging to it are of a strictly religious nature, it is manifest that SINCERE PIETY is one of its principal and indispensable prerequisites.

Whilst none, we presume, will dispute the fact itself, many who are deeply concerned in this matter, may form a very mistaken estimate of the nature and extent of the thing required. The sincerity and genuineness of this piety should first be ascertained, by a careful examination of its origin, its exercises, and its aims. Is it assumed, or is it real? Is it a form of godliness merely, or a form attended with power? Is it a routine of ceremonies well and strictly observed, or is it a system of graces carefully cultivated? Does it pervade and control the soul, as well as rectify every obliquity in the life? Is the Spirit of God its author, the law of God its rule, and the glory of God its aim? Will it endure scrutiny? Will it justify its character

* For a complete and satisfactory proof of the position here advanced, the reader is referred to an Essay on the Nature and Warrant for the Office of Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church, by Samuel Miller, D. D., Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government in the Theological Seminary at Princeton.

under the application of scriptural tests? Is it mere profession, or is it profession well sustained by practice? A man may be a hypocrite from design, or a hypocrite through mistake; if we are conscious of having no intention of deceiving others, are we fully persuaded that we do not deceive ourselves? The result, in both cases, will be fatal, and in the latter, extreme caution is required to obviate the danger. No man should style himself a Christian upon slight evidence; in a concern of such infinite moment, a hasty conclusion may prove the cause of eternal regret. A satisfactory opinion of personal piety is not to be derived from a comparison of ourselves with others, but by a comparison of ourselves with the law and testimony of Christ. This is the only infallible standard, and by this we are to determine the character of religious feeling and sentiment. Guided by this, we shall perceive that genuine piety is distinguishable from a formal adoption of general principles, and from the wild ebullition of visionary and enthusiastic feeling; that it is the union of rational opinions, and of sanctified emotions; that it supposes the proper exercise of the intellectual faculties, and the cordial enlistment of the affections: that it is supreme love to God, and universal benevolence to man; that it consists not in an occasional exercise, but in a permanent habit of holiness; that it is a participation of the spirit of Christ, and a sedulous imitation of his example; that, in a word, it is a fountain of life opened in the soul by the Spirit of God, whence continually flow "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance."

But those who bear rule in the Church of Christ, should not only ascertain the genuineness of their piety, but possess the graces of the Christian in more than their ordinary degree of perfection. Their piety should not only be real but conspicuous. Without attempting to enumerate all the traits in which their exemplariness should be manifest, it may not be amiss to give prominence to a few.

1. It is important that they who are called to "rule well" in the house of God, should possess a piety strikingly characterized by its SPIRITUALITY. The religion of many consists in forms and observances; it resembles a statue, symmetrical in its proportions, and perfect in its external features, but destitute of freshness, warmth, and vitality, because not pervaded by an etherial spirit. There may be no moral precept which such men evidently violate, and no outward duty which they seem to neglect; and yet, in their religion, there is a sensible want—a destitution of warmth and life, which greatly detracts from its excellence. The soul is not thrown into it; it has not thoroughly imbued the mind, or taken hold of the affections of the

heart; instead of sinking deeply into the inner man, it floats upon the surface. On the other hand, the religion to which the Holy Spirit has affixed the seal of his approbation, is deeply seated in the heart, purifying its affections, spiritualizing its thoughts, and constituting between it and heaven, the principle of a secret, yet powerful attraction. It is the new creation of the soul, the regeneration of its powers, which cannot consist with habitual worldly mindedness. Those who have experienced it, are no longer of the world, but are chosen out of the world; from it, they extract not their pleasures, nor derive their consolations; they live in it, and yet they live above it; they use it, but they do not abuse it; they are risen with Christ, and seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God, placing their affections on things above, not on things on the earth. The religion which is spiritual, and all true religion partakes of this character, disposes the soul to frequent and holy intercourse with God; it dwells much in heavenly contemplations; it filially confides in God; pants after him as the hart for the water brook; seeks closer intimacy, and sweeter communion with him, and breathes forth its continual and fervent aspirations for larger communications of grace, and brighter manifestations of the divine glory. Such piety is not nominal, but real, and such should be the piety of rulers in the Church of Christ. Heavenly mindedness should characterize them, and by the tenderness of their religious sensibilities, and the warmth of their devotions, they should be distinguished above others. They should be remarked as men of prayer, and not as men of vain conversation: as men devoutly engaged in the cause of the Gospel, and not as the eager aspirants for worldly distinction. It is a dishonour to them and their profession, that they should display greater zeal in politics than in religion; that they should be more familiar with their ledgers than their Bibles, and that they should manifest greater eagerness, and deeper interest, at the marts of worldly traffic, than among the assemblies of the saints. True it is, that they are peculiarly tempted to worldly mindedness from the nature of their occupations; secular business brings them into contact with worldly men; they, necessarily, mingle much in their society, upon the equality which similarity of avocations produces, and, accordingly, unusual watchfulness is required to prevent them from descending from their high station, and from being known before the world merely as men of business. But if the danger be manifest, the duty of guarding against it is equally manifest. We would not recommend to them in this intercourse, the adoption of demure looks, a forbidding distance of manners, a religious phraseology studied and measured, or that kind of se-

verity, or strictness, which might excite prejudice against religion as a thing unlovely and undesirable; but we would dissuade from that undue familiarity, which induces unwarrantable concessions and compromises to the claims of the world, and which, eventually, terminates in inconsistencies of conduct, which men of unsanctified minds are shrewd in detecting, and prompt in converting into an occasion of reproach. Be spiritual; let your religion be of that kind which converses much with heavenly things; and respect from the world, and usefulness in the Church, will infallibly be secured.

2. Those who are called to rule in the house of God, should also possess a piety which displays its power in SELF-GOVERNMENT. By this we do not merely mean the control of the sensual appetites and passions; for this is a primary duty of Christians in every station. They who put on Christ, have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts, and are obliged to be temperate in all things. But we particularly refer to the command of temper which, in its unrestrained ebullitions, is peculiarly dishonourable in one who is designated as a spiritual guide. It may be said of temper, that in a very peculiar and signal manner, it characterizes the man. When well regulated, it conceals almost every defect; and when unrestrained, it hides and neutralizes almost every virtue. It is the every-day aspect by which an individual is distinguished, and according as it is well or ill-governed, he secures esteem or excites contempt. He neither deserves, nor can acquire influence over others, who does not subdue and manage his own spirit. Ruling Elders, to secure efficiency in their office, should be exemplary in this respect, and whilst exercising a general control over their spirit, they should particularly avoid *moroseness*, *imperiousness*, and *irritability* of temper.

MOROSENESS is peculiarly unfortunate in those who are obliged, by their official duties, to exert a salutary influence over others. It throws an atmosphere of gloom around its victim, the very neighbourhood of which is studiously avoided. The sour and sullen aspect, which is its external index, never fails to repel; it forbids esteem and confidence, which are won only by the face which beams with light, and the heart which overflows with kindly feeling. The morose man is not only an undesirable companion, but, if a professor of the Gospel, an exceedingly unfavourable specimen of the effect of Christian principle. He should, therefore, never be elevated to "high places," to the manifest detriment of the good cause, but be left to indulge his sullenness in obscurity. His mind is morbid; it is ill at ease with itself; it is accustomed to contemplate even the glorious and animating subjects of religion through a discoloured me-

dium; and hence, the more distant his removal from public view, the more effectually will the cause of the Gospel be subserved. Cheerfulness, courteousness, and urbanity, on the contrary, not only secure esteem, but prepare the way for enlarged usefulness.

IMPERIOUSNESS is another defect in temper, which should be carefully avoided, by spiritual rulers. The communication of any degree of power, implying superiority, has a tendency to inflate the mind, and produce this objectionable feature of character. Station can never dignify the incumbent, unless the incumbent, by the propriety of his conduct, adds lustre to his station; and there is no reason why men should plume themselves on their authority, and lord it over God's heritage, merely from the fact of their official designation. An Elder should assume no consequence; he should never imagine that his office has imparted to him any superiority in virtue, and hence, he should not regard the poorest and obscurest of the flock as his inferiors. The Scriptures require that we should not be high-minded, but condescending and courteous. Authority may be exercised without offence, but the imperious exercise of it is always odious; and if the general deportment of a ruler in the church gives rise to the suspicion, that he is proud and haughty, his presence will be disliked, and his influence proportionally diminished.

IRRITABILITY of temper is even still more exceptionable in an Elder. Peevishness or anger, quickly and upon slight provocation excited, betrays the most pitiable weakness of character, and the most striking want of self-command. An inflamed man, as he loses self-respect, so he loses the respect of others; he is an object of pity to his friends, and of contempt to his enemies. And shall one who is to be an example to the flock, be easily provoked? Shall the fiercest fires be kindled in his bosom upon the application of the slightest spark? Is he to encounter no opposition without awakened wrath? In religious and secular affairs, is he to be known as one *given to anger?* It would be disgraceful in any Christian, but in an officer of the Church it is an enormity. Frequent instructions are given in the word of God, which are intended to counteract this evil, and all these apply with peculiar force to those who rule in the Church. Much, very much, depends upon temper, in relation to personal comfort, and the welfare of the Church; and he that is unable to govern himself, is utterly unfit to govern "in the house of God."

3. The piety of one, who is to rule in the Church, should further evince itself in ACTIVE ZEAL. That is, it should be an earnest piety—a piety always abounding in mercy and good

fruits. Zeal, as applied to religion, expresses itself under three modes: by *personal contributions* of our worldly substance, in such proportions as an enlightened conscience and the wants of the Church may dictate; by the *dedication of our time*, influence, and general talents, regulated by the same proportion; and by *fervent and importunate prayer*. The zeal which does not display itself in all these modes, is essentially defective. It is not sufficient that we give our money alone, or our time, or our prayers; sincerity in our religious profession, and a heart-felt desire for the glory of Christ, will constrain us to unite them, and we shall grudge neither time, nor wealth, nor prayers, for the furtherance of the Gospel. This is a duty incumbent upon every Christian, but more particularly upon the Eldership. A glance at the Church will sufficiently evince, that the tone of zeal in any particular congregation, is derived from its spiritual officers. Let a deep interest for the success of the Gospel pervade their bosoms, and the sacred feeling will communicate itself to the people; but let apathy paralyze their energies, and its benumbing influence will inevitably seize upon the flock. An Eldership of penurious and contracted spirit, will not only counteract the efforts of a minister, but render the Church over which they preside, utterly useless, as it respects the benevolent projects of the day. Alas! how many painful illustrations of this truth rise before our view! How has the cause of the Gospel suffered, and how has the treasury of the Lord been defrauded, through the default of those who were bound to teach the Church its duty, by their example? So impressed are we with this subject, that we are constrained to believe, that an Eldership destitute of the zeal which we have described, is a curse to the Church.

The next general qualification of a Ruling Elder may be expressed in his having a "good report of them which are without." His general conduct should be so uniformly excellent, his integrity so incorruptible and so far above suspicion, and his profession and practice so harmonious and correspondent, as to constrain the good opinion of the world. Religious consistency is very closely scrutinized by the world; any defect in it, is a popular apology for irreligion among those who reject the Gospel, and the apology is relied on in proportion to the high standing of him, in whom the defect is observable. Office gives prominence, and prominence increases responsibility; the ministers of the sanctuary, therefore, and the rulers in the house of God, should cultivate a spirit and maintain a deportment which, instead of shrinking from scrutiny, would silence the gainsaying of ungodly men. Whilst Elders should have a good report for their general consistency, there are some par-

ticular points in their character and conduct especially deserving their attention.

They should be noted for their GRAVITY. By this we do not mean demureness or sourness of aspect, for this is neither gravity itself, nor the proper external expression of it. A man may be grave, and yet his countenance wear the most benignant expression; it may be illuminated with cheerfulness, and smile kindly upon all. But on the other hand, by gravity, we wish to denote a state of the feelings, a chastened soberness of spirit, resulting from deep and uniform impressions of the presence, and of the love of God, of the uncertainty of life, and of the nearness of eternity. He who has these things continually in view will feel his spirit subdued into a quietness and sobriety which are utterly uncongenial with the "jesting which is not convenient," and the boisterous merriment which is folly. Lightness of speech and frivolity of behaviour will be alike avoided, and his associates will not be selected from among those who are known to have adopted for their motto, "let us eat, drink, and be merry." Such gravity may well be expected from him who is an Elder.

Elders should be noted for their PRUDENCE; not merely in the management of their worldly goods, by which lavish and unnecessary expenditures will be prevented, but particularly in relation to their religious intercourse, and the discharge of their official duties. We know that it has become fashionable to decry prudence in religion, as if it were a mere pretext for the neglect of difficult duty; but, admitting that it may sometimes be thus perverted, is it not dangerous to inculcate obedience to the impulse of feeling without regard to prudential considerations? May not the cause of Christ suffer by injudicious management? May not a "zeal without knowledge" prove as injurious as the absence of all zeal? May not the heart of a sinner be hardened against the truth by an ill-timed and ill-expressed admonition or rebuke, when a more prudent course might have won him? May not hatred and contempt be unnecessarily incurred? Is it not quite possible that many who suppose they are persecuted for righteousness' sake, are really persecuted for the sake of their imprudence? We verily believe that prudence is one of the first, and yet one of the most difficult duties of the Christian; and in the officers of the Church, it is of equal importance in the guidance of its concerns, with experience and skill in the pilot, who overcomes the difficulties and dangers of the deep, by the judicious management of the helm.

An Elder should have a good report from without, in relation to his SECULAR TRANSACTIONS. Religious reputation is very apt to receive a taint from a free intercourse with the world, and yet

it is by no means a necessary result. A Christian Elder may and ought to evince his principles in the ordinary details of life; and in his secular vocation, he should not leave his Christianity behind him, but carry it with him. This *integrity* should first be conspicuous, not only in abstaining from direct dishonesty, but from those pitiful frauds which many consider as justifiable arts in trade, and which consist in overrating commodities for sale, and thus producing a wrong impression on purchasers, or in underrating commodities to be bought, and thus producing an equally erroneous impression on sellers. Every transaction should be commended for its candour and honesty, and even the suspicion of an attempt to gain an unfair advantage should be avoided. How much is religion injured by an opposite conduct in professors of religion, and how unworthy are they of their name, when they permit their love of gain to produce in them forgetfulness of the rules of equity! Christian integrity requires the exact fulfilment of all business obligations and promises. Truth must be regarded, and no obligation should be assumed which might endanger truth. But if misfortune should overtake the Christian; if circumstances should prevent the fulfilment of his obligations; if he should become bankrupt and involve others in his failure, it should be made to appear, that there was no intentional dishonesty, no culpable misconduct, no unrighteous appropriations; and in the event of future prosperity, he should consider his obligations as renewed, although they may have been legally cancelled, and his duty as imperative, to liquidate former claims. This is the obvious dictate of Christian integrity. *Generosity* is equally essential with integrity, in the high character of a Christian Elder in his transactions; a generosity which would spurn meanness, parsimony, and close dealing; a generosity opposed to the "love of filthy lucre," which grasps at every thing, and will accumulate gains by every method not positively condemned by the laws of the land; in fine, a generosity that would refuse to take advantage of the embarrassments of others by exacting inordinate interest. In all these things an Elder should be a pattern, letting his light so shine as to obviate any suspicion of his Christian character.

Once more, an Elder should have a good report from without in relation to the GOVERNMENT OF HIS FAMILY. He should be "one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the Church of God?" The argument of the Apostle is conclusive, and the qualification it is intended to enforce is of the first importance. To maintain the worship of God in their families is the first branch of this duty. This should be observed with undeviating punctuality;

with seriousness and fervour, and with a Christian discretion, which will prevent a tediousness on the one hand, and hurried formality on the other. The religious instruction of children, and as far as practicable, of domestics, is another branch. A practical inculcation of the truth of the Gospel, and an untiring perseverance in the duty are indispensable. The Catechisms of our Church afford an excellent text book, and an unequalled summary of the truths taught in the Holy Scriptures. These, treasured up in the memories of youth, will not soon be obliterated; and although not comprehended in the first instance, will form a noble foundation for future acquisitions of divine knowledge. But it will be necessary to accompany such instructions with affectionate exhortation and fervent prayer, to render it effectual. Without, however, attempting to enumerate all the particular duties which a Christian owes to his family, we would dwell with particular emphasis upon one, which officers in the Church of Christ owe to themselves, their families and the Church; we mean an avoidance of undue compliance with the customs of the world, and the exercise of their authority in restraining, in this respect, those under their guardian care. It is the unhappiness of the Church in the present day, to be brought to terms of improper familiarity with the world. The line of demarkation between the two communities, is not sufficiently distinct. But why is it so? It is perhaps to be attributed to a relaxation of discipline in the Church, and this remissness of discipline is perhaps countenanced by those who have the exercise of it in their own hands, to shield their own delinquencies. We have heard professing Christians, as well as others, plead in justification of their worldly compliances, the example of Ministers and Elders! Their children, it was true, were found at the ball room, the theatres, and the midnight rout, but then they were in company with the children of Ministers and Elders! And if this plea be well founded, how, we ask, will officers in the Church justify their conduct before God, in countenancing customs of the world, which, if not positively vitiating, at least create distaste for the self-denying doctrines of the Gospel? How will they excuse themselves for causing the flock of Christ to stray by their example? If the souls of their offspring perish through this default, how can their skirts be clear of their blood? The people of God *must be peculiar*, they must be separate from the world, and the leaders of the people must set the example. "Touch not, taste not, handle not."

The last qualification we shall mention as desirable, and even necessary in a Ruling Elder is INTELLIGENCE. Under this term we do not comprehend what is technically styled *learned*

knowledge, which is the result of an exact and finished education; for, although the best talents and largest acquirements would not be misplaced by such an application, yet the circumstances of the case forbid that they should be regarded as indispensable. But we mean such a degree of information on subjects relating to the official duties of their station, as would distinguish the incumbent above ordinary Christians, and induce them to regard his counsels with respect. No one should accept a station, of the duties of which he is ignorant, and for the proper occupancy of which, he is conscious of his unfitness. Ignorance is never respectable, and it is particularly contemptible when exposed in high places, and presuming to guide and instruct. The intelligence which we consider necessary in the present instance, should extend to the following particulars:

1. An Elder should possess an adequate and even systematic knowledge of the doctrines of Revelation. Not with the view of preparing himself for skillful controversy, but that his faith may be an intelligent one, and that he himself may not be driven about by every wind of doctrine. He should distinctly know what he does believe, and be prepared as distinctly to state the reasons upon which his faith is founded. All should be able to perceive that his adoption of a particular system of opinions, has not resulted from educational prejudice, or from a species of chance, but from rational examination. A deficiency in this respect would be censurable in a private Christian, but highly inexcusable in a spiritual leader. Two important advantages would result from a sanctified acquaintance with the principles of religion: it would benefit the possessor, and assist him in benefiting others. Knowledge is the guide of practice; it imparts tone to the external conduct, and in proportion as right views of divine truth are attained, stability in the faith is secured, and religious comfort is promoted. But not only the personal satisfaction, but the public usefulness of an Elder depend on this knowledge. His faith may be assailed, and he should be able to defend it; or he may be appealed to for instruction, and he should be prepared to communicate it. Whatever, therefore, God has been pleased to reveal, should be considered as deserving of careful study; and whilst the formularies of the church are rendered familiar by frequent perusal, they should be diligently compared with the word of God upon which they are professedly based, and of which they form an admirable exposition.

2. An Elder should possess an intelligent acquaintance with the order and discipline of the Church, in which he bears rule. The necessity of knowledge in this case must at once be obvious. In his circumstances, it would be discreditable to be at

a loss for a reason of his preference of Presbyterianism to Episcopacy and Independency: and in cases of ecclesiastical process, in which he is called to act as a judge, it would not only be discreditable, but criminal, to display such an ignorance of the rules of procedure as might prove a serious detriment to those, whose Christian character or standing is at stake. It is too common for Elders to depend on the knowledge of the clergy in such cases, instead of examining for themselves; and hence, in the various judicatories, they seldom assist by judicious opinions and counsels in the transaction of business involving ecclesiastical law. This fact is much to be regretted; but the remedy is within the reach of every one who will be at sufficient pains to study the "Form of Government," the "Book of Discipline," the "Rules for Judicatories," and the "Assembly's Digest" of adjudged cases; all of which have been prepared for Elders as well as Ministers, and may be perfectly understood by the patient application of plain common sense.

3. An Elder should be acquainted with casuistical divinity, or, in other words, he should be skilled in resolving cases of conscience. Frequently, in the discharge of his duty, he will be required to consider the cases of professing Christians in all the variety of their aspects, and to exercise a discrimination, without which his advice and counsel will be perfectly nugatory. A general strain of religious remark which is used upon all occasions, if it does no harm, will not, likely, do much good. Different cases in conscience, like different cases of disease, require different treatment; and to adapt it properly, there should be a large acquaintance with the various methods of God's dealing with the souls of men, and with the various arts and devices which the great adversary employs to deceive and destroy. An Elder should himself be experienced, that he may with greater skill discriminate between false and just hopes, between fictitious and genuine feeling; that he may be able to direct the anxious, succour the tempted, console the disconsolate, and warn the self-deceiving and presumptuous. They become the best furnished in this respect, who exercise themselves most diligently. The best sources from which information is to be drawn upon these subjects, are the examples recorded in Scripture, Christian biography, conversation with fellow Christians, and frequent visits to the bed of sickness and death. A careful resort to these sources will furnish both the mind and heart, and qualify an Elder to become a messenger of glad tidings.

4. Finally, an Elder should be no novice in his acquaintance with men. As ignorance of the world disqualifies for the successful pursuits of worldly business, so ignorance of the diver-

sity of human character, will prove a serious impediment in the government of the Church. We have often known congregations to be thrown into tumult, and reduced to the verge of ruin, by an imprudent exercise of authority, originating in this kind of ignorance. The same rule of procedure cannot be applied to all cases with the same propriety. A wise parent will study the different dispositions of his children, and adapt his treatment accordingly; and the same course will be pursued by a wise ruler in the Church. In this sense, Paul became all things to all men. To acquire influence over an individual, it is necessary that his dispositions, his temperament, and his peculiar mode of thinking should be first studied. This preliminary knowledge obtained, it will be easy to see how to proceed in doing him good; but if, in the neglect of this knowledge, one general course is pursued in relation to all, it will as likely be wrong as right, in a majority of cases. Thus, every man conversant with the affairs of the Church must know, that, in the exercise of discipline, the ends of it will be defeated, if the application of it be not regulated by discretion. The severity of the rebuke, which might be indispensable in one case, would be ruinous in another; some are melted and won by tenderness, when they have been guilty of a censurable act, and others are only to be aroused by severity. In a word, a well ordered Church, in which the unity of the spirit is preserved in the bonds of peace, will always be found to be greatly indebted to this kind of knowledge in its spiritual officers, which inclines them to act judiciously, and to conduct the affairs of the Church with discretion.

Having thus presented an imperfect view of what we conceive to be the qualifications of Ruling Elders, we will now consider the duties incumbent upon them in this office.

DUTIES OF RULING ELDERS.

As men are not to be selected for the Eldership from the mere circumstance of wealth, station, or worldly respectability, or because they may be covetous of the distinction; so, when solemnly chosen from a persuasion of their peculiar fitness, they should never regard their office as a sinecure. It is lamentably true, that it is often thus regarded by incumbents, who, either ignorant or forgetful of their peculiar responsibilities, are seldom seen in the discharge of a solitary duty appropriate to their station. They may occasionally attend the meetings of session, or assist in the distribution of the sacramental emblems, but in the more spiritual duties of their station, how

seldom are they found cordially engaged? Whenever it is to any considerable extent true, that Elders are habitually unmindful of their duty as spiritual leaders, the flock committed to their oversight must be exposed to danger, and the occupation of the office will be worse than useless. It appears highly necessary then, that the nature of the service which the Church has a right to expect from them should be explicitly stated and urgently enforced.

It is the duty of an Elder, to bring into energetic exercise, the qualifications which we have before enumerated, in promoting the interests of the particular church with which he is associated, and in extending aid to the church more generally.

1. He should heartily cooperate with his pastor in giving efficacy to the measures which immediately relate to his particular church. Here he enjoys an appropriate sphere of action, in which his labours, if they be faithfully directed, may prove eminently serviceable. One of his most peculiar duties is, to encourage, by his presence and aid, MEETINGS FOR SOCIAL WORSHIP. The existence and prosperity of such meetings are essential to the well-being of a church. It is no longer problematical, but certain, that where they are neglected, religion languishes, and the public ministrations of the word come home to the heart with less energy and effect. And the reason is evident. They afford salutary pauses during the week, to repress the strong tendencies to worldly-mindedness—to deepen reflection—to cherish the spirit of devotion, and to prepare the heart for the most profitable employment of the privileges of the Sabbath. To promote and enliven these meetings, Elders must attend constantly and conscientiously, and engage fervently and devoutly; and we can scarcely imagine a valid excuse for their absence, except in serious bodily indisposition. Their example must produce an effect; it will either incite the people to more diligent attention to the means of grace, or it will afford them a plausible pretext for their criminal neglect; and wherever such meetings have been established, it will generally be found, that the attendance of the people is proportioned to the attendance of their spiritual officers. This being the fact, how heavy must be their responsibilities, and how aggravated their criminality, if through their default, the people forsake the assembling of themselves together, and cease to be instant in prayer!

Another particular duty incumbent upon them is, the INSTRUCTION OF THE YOUTH OF THE CHURCH. This, it is true, is an important pastoral duty, but it is one in which the Eldership should participate. Their assistance is essential to its proper performance, and is required by all the circumstances of the

case. The youth of a Church are its hope; they are naturally regarded as its future supporters and guardians, upon whom its prosperity in a succeeding age is dependent; but if their minds are not early imbued with religious truth, and an early attachment in them to divine things secured, this expectation is disappointed, and a sorrowful prospect for the future is presented. The lambs of the flock, defenceless, inexperienced, and disposed to wander, should be carefully guarded, patiently instructed, and affectionately guided in the path of truth. The religious culture of many of them is wholly neglected by their parents, who feel no solicitude for their souls and employ no means for their instruction in righteousness. The dangers, therefore, to which they are exposed, from irreligious example at home, should plead powerfully in their behalf. They have precious and undying souls—they are subject to peculiar and pressing temptations—they are, from the tenderness of their age, susceptible of impressions which may be permanently good or bad—they may be won or lost to God—and shall not these considerations insure to them the paternal care of the church? Will not their Elders tenderly watch for their souls, and instil into them the principles of true piety? Unquestionably this is their duty.

Visitation is another branch of his duty. Not only every communicant, but every individual in a church should be familiarly known to its officers; and this acquaintance cannot be acquired without systematic visitation. The objections usually urged against this plan, are more imaginary than real, and the experiment would prove that it is not only practicable, but pleasant and useful. In the prosecution of it, innumerable opportunities would occur of benefiting both parents and children. Many practical lessons might be inculcated—many useful inquiries might be answered—many seasonable admonitions might be administered—and many persuasives to piety be employed in relation to persons, whose peculiar cases have not been fully met, in the public ministrations of the word. But whilst there should be a general visitation, particular attention should be extended to the sick and afflicted. In such cases much attention is expected, and far more than a Pastor can ordinarily give, under the pressure of his various duties. The Elders, therefore, must be his helpers, evincing sympathy for the distressed; reminding them of their duties in the day of affliction, and bearing with them the message of peace to the sick and the dying. And to this duty they should be excited by the consideration, that the heart, when touched by affliction, is more sensitive and more accessible to religious truth, and its pride and repulsiveness are more likely to be overcome by well

adapted exhortation and reproof. If the sick are required to "call for the Elders of the church," that they may "pray over them," it implies the duty of the Elders to be prompt in obeying the call; and if the Elders are supposed to possess "pure and undefiled religion before God," they should demonstrate it, by "visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction."

THE ADMISSION OF INDIVIDUALS TO THE SEALING ORDINANCES OF THE CHURCH is another duty incumbent on Elders in connexion with their Pastors. Our Church has wisely provided that the personal piety of individuals, proposing themselves as candidates for church fellowship, should be strictly scrutinized. An honest profession always rests upon this foundation, and all other is but plausible hypocrisy. To guard against unhallowed intrusions, caution and vigilance are necessary in the officers of the Church. A Pastor should never assume the responsibilities connected with this duty, to the exclusion of the opinions and judgment of his session. Here they may, and ought to act as very important "helps;" and if ever they are called upon to bring into requisition their knowledge of men, and their acquaintance with experimental religion, it should be in cases of this kind. If formality in the profession of the Gospel is a curse to the church, they are solemnly pledged to employ every means to prevent its introduction. And how can this be done, unless they are cautious, discreet, and watchful in opening the pale of communion to candidates? Examinations are conducted in a manner entirely too loose and lenient; as if the admission of the individual were to be a matter of personal favour, rather than a matter of conscience. Improper motives may multiply the facilities of admission; and among these improper motives, perhaps no one has usually greater influence than the "lust of numbers," or a desire to impose the belief, that a particular church is flourishing and prosperous. Sad must be the result when such is the motive. The kingdom of Christ is not strengthened by accessions, but by accessions of the *right* kind; and the army of the living God is not rendered more effective by a large enlistment of such as have no spiritual discipline. To prevent the evil effects of indiscriminate admissions, there should be a thorough inquiry into the nature and ground of every candidate's faith, and into the tenor of his life. The best appearance may be false, and although human sagacity may not always be able to discriminate between the genuine and the spurious, yet the cautious attempt should always be made, both in mercy to the church, and in mercy to the candidate. Sessions, therefore, should uniformly inquire, is the knowledge of the individual competent? Are his views of divine truth correct and connected? Does he appear conscious of a work

of grace in his heart? Is his experience of a Gospel hope well evidenced? Has sufficient time elapsed to test the solidity and the operations of his faith? And, on the contrary, it would be well to inquire, if the application has not been the result of undue solicitation, or encouragement, from some quarter? If it may not be accounted for upon the ground of temporary apprehension, animal excitement, or morbid feeling? If there be suspicion, there can be no danger in postponement, with a view to further trial. Caution is indispensable, and where this is prayerfully and conscientiously used, the church, although it may embrace fewer professors, will abound with more graces.

A still further duty is activity in RECONCILING DIFFERENCES, AND QUIETING ANGRY FEELINGS WHICH MAY ARISE IN THE CHURCH. These are to be expected from the imperfection of human nature; and yet their occurrence is always destructive of spirituality. Such differences usually originate in trivial causes, and subsequent imprudence in the parties widen the breach. A cautious and prudent mediator may arrest the evil at the commencement, and quiet the exasperation, which, if permitted to gain strength, may result in entire alienation. A pastor cannot accomplish this duty alone; the Elders should be anxious to participate in the blessing promised to peace-makers. Private Christians are seldom aware of their duty, in seeking a friendly interview with those against whom they have any cause of complaint; and if such interviews are sought, they are generally managed in so bad a spirit as to magnify the difficulty, and produce greater estrangement. This, however, may be obviated by the seasonable interference of their spiritual officers, who, by their affectionate exhortations and discreet counsels, may unite Christians in the bonds of peace, and thus essentially subserve the cause of the Gospel.

It is the duty of Elders to SUSTAIN THEIR PASTORS AND TO INCREASE THEIR INFLUENCE. This is to be done not merely *negatively*, by abstaining from secret insinuations against their character or ministerial conduct, which may lessen them in the esteem of the people; but *positively*, by cooperating with them in every proper measure; by evincing for them a cordial friendship; by removing from the minds of any of the people any dislike which they may have conceived against them; and by reporting to them any circumstances, or facts, the knowledge of which may be useful to them in the discharge of their sacred functions. Ministers are in no ordinary degree dependent upon their Elders; the neglect or misconduct of the latter may essentially mar the usefulness of the former, whilst their zealous and friendly cooperation may render them a blessing to the flock.

But finally, it is a highly important duty of the Eldership to